

Muslim descendants of Jews in Morocco: identity and practice¹

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One day a young Jewish girl from Fez had a fight with her family and ran out of the *mellah* and banged on the doors of the *mechouar* (surrounding the royal palace). They opened the doors, she ran in and was never seen again. They raised her in the palace, she converted to Islam and was married to a Muslim. In 2014, she told her adult granddaughter of her story, that she was a Jewish girl from the mellah of Fez. Her granddaughter is Muslim but is puzzlingly attracted to us [older Jewish ladies], she looks just like a Jewish woman from Fez, blond with large green eyes.²

Since 2010 a small group of Moroccan Muslims with Jewish ancestry have been reintegrating parts of their Jewish identity and practice into their life. As is with any group that recaptures lost identities, identity reconstruction occurs on a continuum of practice and engagement. In Morocco, publicly identifying with Jewish ancestry seems to be emerging from being completely taboo as recently as ten years ago to some who are maintaining a firm connection to Muslim practice while acknowledging Jewish ancestry. At the furthest extreme of this continuum, a small number of young Moroccans (five cases that are known to me) are engaging with Jewish ritual practice. This article will address the negotiations around and development of this continuum of identity and practice in contemporary Morocco.

These Muslim Moroccans who are exploring the Jewish component of their ancestry are contemporary examples of the kinds of negotiations and decisions that Crypto-Jews made 300-400 years ago, only a few generations after after the forced conversions of 1391 and

¹ This article is a reworked version of the paper presented at the 24th Annual Meeting of the Society for Crypto-Jewish Studies in Dallas, Texas on July 22, 2014

² Private conversation, BM, May 16, 2015, Casablanca.

1492. Their experience is not an exact parallel but when taking a closer look, one observes many shared elements of a similar process. Catholic Spain had forced conversions, an expulsion, an Inquisition, hundreds of years of terrorized Crypto-Jews. In contrast, Morocco has been a country where the Jewish population felt protected by the government and only during brief time periods, there were waves of forced conversions, usually tied to moments of political and religious unrest for the general population.

Unlike Crypto-Jews who are four to five centuries removed from the ancestors who converted, the Moroccan examples show cases which are two to four generations removed from the original conversion. The memories are fresh, and in some cases their ancestor who converted, or who married out of the community, is still alive and they interact with them. I believe that these modern-day cases can help scholars understand what drove second and third generation Conversos to decide to reincorporate Jewish ritual and identity into their lives in previous centuries, many generations removed from their ancestors who had converted, willingly or unwillingly.

Morocco and Jewish legalities

Morocco is the only country in the world apart from Israel, where Jewish family law is legally binding as a national law for Jews in contemporary times. The origin of this manner of structuring legal concerns of the Jewish minority started during Cherifian Morocco. Because of the status of Jews in Islam as People of the Book (*Ahl el Kitab*), they could be judged by their own Rabbis. As such, the Jewish community had a contract with the authorities which provided protection and legal independence after the community payed a tax: *Djizia*. This gave them the status of *dhimmi*, protected non-citizen minority. (Amar, 1980: 223). In contemporary Morocco, Jews use the rabbinical courts for *halacha* in reference to family law: marriage, divorce and inheritance. For Moroccans these issues are resolved according to religious law: *Halacha* for Jews and *Sharia* for Muslims.

During the French and Spanish Protectorates (1912-1956) the religious courts were reorganized by two *dahirs* from May 22, 1918. The first one addressed the reorganization of the Rabbinical tribunals and the Jewish notaries and the other one instituted a High Rabbinical Tribunal (Amar, 1980: 226). Moroccan Jews were considered by the French and Spanish Protectorates as “indigènes” just as Moroccan Muslims. Legally and politically Jews and Muslims were just as Moroccan in the eyes of the Europeans. However, since the Jews had been *dhimmi*, in the eyes of Moroccan Muslims and of some Jews, the perception of the *Marocanité* (Moroccanness) of the Jews was not completely clear.

This very “Moroccanness” of Moroccan Jews was questioned by both Jews and Muslims during the years after Moroccan independence (1956) from the French and Spanish protectorates. The founding of the State of Israel and the tensions felt in Morocco during and after the wars of Israel with their Arab neighbors, as well as rising pan-Arabism, a visit of Nasser to Morocco in 1960 and a push by both a Moroccan Islamic political party (Istiqlal) and efforts from HIAS and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee to encourage Jewish emigration, pushed thousands of Jewish Moroccan families to leave in the sixties and early seventies.

During those years saying the word Israel was frowned upon in mixed company (Jewish & non-Jewish), and people said they were going to *eretz* (the land), *le pays* (the country) or *allá* (there)... even when speaking amongst Jews. In postcolonial Morocco, the Jewish component of Moroccan history (as well as the Berber portion) was omitted from the educational curriculum in the desire to build a homogeneous arabic national Moroccan narrative. In other words, it was the time to build a Moroccan identity after the years of European government, and the de facto decision was that Moroccan meant Muslim and Arab. This definition eliminated the richness of Moroccan’s complex identity and erased the Jewish component, and more dramatically the Berber element, which is around 60% of the Moroccan population, from the national discourse of Moroccan identity.

The legal independence that the Jewish community has had historically and continues to have today in relationship to the Muslim majority, has been an important element in the maintaining of a vibrant minority community. The government's official respect of Jewish traditions, supported institutionally by the inclusion and financial support of Jewish courts within the national legal system is one of the ways that Moroccan society has confirmed the "Moroccanness" of the Jewish community.

Identity Formation and Sephardim in Morocco

Considering the various historical waves of Jewish migration into Morocco, Moroccan Jews have an various levels of layered influences in the formation of their identities as Jews and as Moroccans. There are Berber Jews (Amazighen), Arab Jews and Sephardic Jews. They were traditionally based in different geographical areas, had different languages, dress and culinary traditions. The most recent influx was the Sephardic Jews who flowed into Morocco in the years before and after the expulsion. These communities were discrete from each other but none of these boundaries were impermeable, and the internal migrations of Jewish populations throughout Morocco at different historical periods has brought members from every one of these communities into the other. In his monograph *On Identity*, Amin Maalouf, the Lebanese Christian writer who explores the theme of identity and belonging, succinctly articulates the complex factors forming and developing one's identity:

What determines a person's affiliation to a given group is essentially the influence of others: The influence of those about him – relatives, fellow-country-men, co-religionists – who try to make him one of them; together with the influence of those on the other side, who do their best to exclude him [...] He is not himself from the outset; nor does he just 'grow aware' of what he is; he becomes what he is [...] Deliberately or otherwise, those around him mould him, shape him, instill into him family beliefs, rituals, attitudes and conventions, together of course with his native language and also certain fears, aspirations, prejudices and grudges, not forgetting various feelings of affiliation and non-affiliation, belonging and not belonging (Maalouf 2000: 20-21).

In other words, identity is formed by connecting to a group with which there is an affinity and disconnecting from one where that does not exist. The complexity arises when members from one group share certain affinities with members from multiple groups, thus creating what I have named intertwined identities (Paloma [Elbaz], 2011: 110). These intertwined identities, which are typical in the experience of Moroccan Jews, are similar to the fluidity described by Kunin when describing Crypto-Jewish identity-building from the Southwest.

“Our arguments suggest that identity is not essential or fixed. It is instead contextual and fluid. Transformations in self-identification engendered by the discovery of crypto-Jewish ancestors...may imply a single trajectory.” (Kunin, 2009, 195)

Just as Moroccan Jewish identity is not fixed, but is flexible according to the different elements that are being highlighted, Moroccan Muslim identity shows moments of fluidity regarding the ancestral influences that are discovered and highlighted. It relates to Pierre Bordieu’s concept of *habitus* (Bordieu, 1977: 72) where there is an underlying structure but it has a creativity and flexibility that implies agency and transformation.

The Expulsion from Spain and the Moroccan Jewish community

The Jews who left the Iberian peninsula fled in various directions. One of those was across the strait of Gibraltar and into Morocco, where they mostly headed towards the city of Fez. This had been a city where other Jews had fled to for safety, such as the case of Maimonides, in the 12th century during the forced conversions of the Almohades. It was known as a Rabbinic center, and it housed the sages of Islam who taught at El Karaouine, the Mosque and University founded in 859.

Morocco, at this time was divided into two kingdoms, Fez and Maroc, known today as Marrakech. Many Jews settled in Fez in the initial years before and after the expulsion, changing the face of that community forever. During the two hundred years that followed, Jews migrated internally, settling throughout the cities of Morocco. Conversos from the Iberian peninsula settled in Morocco, either as Portuguese traders on the coastal cities. Some of these Portuguese Conversion traders would “disappear” into the Jewish

communities of Morocco when they went on trade trips. In 1542 Bastião de Vargas wrote to King João III to inform him that *cristiãos novos* were traveling to Fez for commerce and would decide to move there definitely and return to Jewish practice. He asked the King to forbid these traders from traveling by land, in other words, that only ocean travel should be authorized, so that their escape from the Portuguese bastions Azzemour and Mazagan to Tetuan or Fez could be avoided. It seems that nothing was done by the King and this wave of return to Jewish communities in Morocco by Portuguese new christians continued throughout the 16th century (García-Arenal, 2003: 40-41). Many of them landed at *Ued el Yehud*,³ in Tangier, and until today, that beach is called by the name that evokes the arrival of *los expulsados de Isabel la Católica*.⁴ They settled in the walled cities and recreated communities based on the traditions and rulings from Spain. However Fez, considered a holy city and which remains a deeply religious and traditional city until today, experienced various waves of religious persecution towards the Jews. There were forced conversions during times where the reigning Sultan was ruthless towards the Jews, as there were also extended peaceful periods of peaceful coexistence, a sort of *convivencia* (Benichou-Gottreich, 2013: 194-195). In Morocco, it is said that many of the Fassis (people from Fez) are descended from Jews. Last names that start with Ben are said to be markers of Jewish ancestors. There are Muslim Kohen, Elbaz, Benhayoun, Benabdejlil, Benchocron, Kessous, Bendisi, etc.

The imperial city of Fez had an ancient Jewish presence known as the *Toshavim* (Hb. ‘natives’). It was decimated in 1465 during a wave of persecution and conversion in central Morocco (Deshen 1989: 8). When, as a result of the 1492 Edict of Expulsion the *Megorashim* (Hb. ‘exiles’) arrived in great numbers, the existing community of *Toshavim* was overwhelmed by these newcomers. In Fez and Marrakech, such differences led to the maintenance of separate residential quarters. (Benichou Gottreich 2013: 8) There were marked differences in Jewish practice and perceptions such as significant differences in

³ The Jewish River

⁴ The ones expelled by Isabel the Catholic Queen

shehitá (Heb. ‘kosher slaughtering’) and their *ketubot* (Heb. ‘marriage contracts’). These two differences made it impossible for them to eat together and marry, thus making assimilation impossible. In the sixteenth century, a group of Rabbis from Fez, the *Hajamei Castilla* (Hak. ‘Sages from Castille’) became dominant in decisions of rabbinical law but in matters of language and culture, the struggle between the two communities was more protracted.

The shift in Fez from Spanish to Judeo-Arabic in the public sphere is demonstrated in the series of *Takkanot* (Heb. ‘Rabbinical rulings’), between 1494 and 1647. These were in Spanish, whereas the next series, 1711 and 1730, were in Judeo-Arabic. Another interesting example of the negotiation between different languages in the public sphere was in 1613 when a sermon about a drought was delivered in Spanish, Judeo-Arabic and Hebrew (Levy 2009: 171). In the private sphere there were cases of women from Northern Morocco marrying into Fassi (Ar. from Fez) families and contributing to perpetuating the use of Spanish⁵. The Sephardic community of Fez had become an almost exclusively Arabic-speaking community by the eighteenth century, having officially dropped the use of Spanish. However, it is striking to note that in the 1940s there was an *Ein Keloheinu* prayer sung in the synagogue Slat al Fassiyin (Synagogue of the people from Fez) in Hebrew, Arabic and Judeo-Spanish.⁶ This prayer represented a remnant, in the public sphere’s memory, of the community’s connection to Spain.

For the Sephardic Jews of Fez the slow transformation of their identity as Sephardic Moroccans had the consequence of their eliminating Judeo-Spanish as a main language and adopting Judeo-Arabic as their main language. Today Fassi Jews express themselves musically and culturally in a form that Jews from the North pejoratively identify as belonging to *forasteros* (Sp. ‘foreigners’). Many of the so-called *forasteros* might be Spanish in origin but their cultural identity became identified as Judeo-Arabic of Sephardi origin. Likewise, Moroccan Jews from the North are called *les espagnoles*, the Spaniards. Each community names the Other with a pejorative, exclusionary label.

⁵ Sion Mamane, Interview, February 12, 2014, Paris.

⁶ Michael Mamane, Interview, December 16, 2008, Brookline, MA.

The names each one of these Jewish communities had for the Other, member of a local Jewish culture that was different from their own, is an example of Shlomo Deshen's explanation:

...there are parallels between Jewish and non-Jewish living in a given time and place ... Jews living in any given time and place exhibit a variant of Jewish society, but in their commonality with contemporary non-Jews they also exhibit a variant of the local society that is common to Jews and non-Jews (Deshen, 1989: 6).

Thus, the Moroccan Jews who spoke Judeo-Spanish, were *les espagnoles* for the Moroccan Arabic-speaking Jews who claimed to be authentically Moroccan. Citizens from Tangier, the port city on the northernmost tip of Morocco, faced an even greater complexity regarding identity. The international status of Tangier influenced the members of the Jewish community creating what Carlos de Nesry, a mid-twentieth century Jewish intellectual from Tangier called an identity that is an 'ensemble of opposites' (De Nesry, 1956: 16). De Nesry described Tangier's Jews as being practically undefinable because of double and triple allegiances that could be contradictory. There were cases of British, Italian, Spanish, French, and Portuguese Jewish citizens from Tangier who were also Haketía (Moroccan Judeo-Spanish) speakers and Moroccan-born. De Nesry suggested that this exemplified the cultural interpenetration of the communities to which they belonged. They were always Jewish, Spanish and Moroccan and in some cases British, Italian or French as well. His statements on conflicting Jewish identities were particularly relevant because de Nesry's book was published in 1956, the year of Moroccan independence when many Jews were faced with a new political climate that expected them to define their allegiances vis à vis the new Moroccan state (Schroeter, 2008: 159). Notwithstanding the general climate of openness between the three dominant communities in Tangier (Muslim, Christian and Jewish), strong communal barriers were very much in place: 'Vivíamos juntos pero no revueltos' (We lived together but not scrambled together) in the words of one of Tangier's current Jewish residents.⁷

⁷ MR, Interview, March 8, 2008, Tangier.

Zones Flous or the interzone between the Jewish and Muslim communities

Rabbi Yosef Israel, who is from a distinguished rabbinic family in Tetuan and who functions as the head of the current National Jewish Rabbinic court, the Beit Din in Casablanca delineated of the consequences of mixed marriages in Morocco as they relate to the interaction between Jewish and Muslim religious law.⁸ Under Muslim law, a child follows the religion of his father. This means that if a young Jewish man wants to marry a Muslim woman, he must convert to Islam and leave the community. His children become a part of the Muslim community. If a Jewish woman marries a Muslim man, she can retain her Jewish status, but her children will automatically be Muslim, even though under Jewish law they are considered to be Jewish as well. As *dhimmi* who were protected subjects of the Sultan, there was no question that the Jewish community could claim those children as theirs. However, even today when the *dhimmi* status has been abolished for a century and Jews are full Moroccan citizens, as a religious minority the community cannot and will not publicly declare those children as Jewish according to *halacha* (Heb. Jewish law). This is a precarious situation and generally undesirable from a Jewish point of view. When these cases come before the Rabbinic Tribunal they can only state that the children were born from a mother who is Jewish according to Halacha. Stating their mother's Jewishness is as close as the Rabbinic Tribunal is willing to go into the murky waters of saying that a Moroccan Muslim with a Jewish mother is legally Jewish according to Jewish law.

Forced Marriages, Conversions and the Negotiation of postcolonial Citizenship

In the years following Moroccan independence there were numerous cases of underage Jewish girls being kidnapped and forcibly converted to Islam in order to marry Moroccan Muslims. Sometimes taken when they were leaving school and then denied any contact with their family or any other Jews, these girls from mostly lower socio-economic backgrounds resigned themselves to their new lives as Muslims. Their family

⁸ Rabbi Yosef Israel, Private conversation, January 8, 2008, Casablanca.

had no way of knowing where to start to look for them, and the authorities were no help. Sometimes the only way the family would know what happened to their daughter was in the Arabic language press. *Al-Alam* the newspaper of the dominant Istiqlal political party began publishing scores of photos of converted Jewish girls with their “original” Jewish name, and their new Muslim one afterwards.⁹



Fanny Assouline
« Malika »



Fanny Bouzaglo
« Farida »



Marie Harroche
« Nadia »

The Moroccan Jewish community’s publication *La Voix des Communautés* (The Voice of the Communities) of May-June 1961 dealt almost exclusively with the issue of forced conversions. A long article detailed the Moroccan penal code stating various important points of law that connected to conversion and forced marriage. The legal code stated the rights of the family to claim an underage girl who had been kidnapped and raped, or forcibly married and connected it to *halacha*, to which Moroccan Jews were and continue to be subject to by Moroccan law. The conclusion was that any conversion done by a minor, established at below 20 years of age, was null and void according to Jewish law. However, Moroccan Muslim law stated that a conversion pronounced by someone as young as 12 or 13 (which was determined to be the age of a certain intellectual maturity) would be considered valid.

David Amar, a community leader wrote that when he brought the matter to the Ministry of Justice in order to find a way to stop the legal impunity rampant in these

⁹ One photo appears as facsimile from “Al-Alam” on the cover of “La Voix des Communautés” 15 (May-June 1961). The repeated publication of these pictures, and the context of the kidnappings is commented in Mohammed Hatimi, “Pour les beaux yeux d’un musulman: Mariages mixtes judéo-musulmans dans le Maroc indépendant” unpublished article, p. 10-11.

cases, the “answer” was that a couple of weeks later *Al-Alam* began publishing almost daily series of photographs of young converted Jewish girls. The debate that ensued on the legal issue of forced conversion connected it to the status of Jews as equal citizens or *dhimmi* in the new Morocco.

The Minister of Islamic Affairs during this time, Allal el Fassi was at the heart of this controversy. During the months when the community outcry had become public, he was quoted in the newspaper *L’Avant Garde* of Saturday, August 11, 1962:

“He who says Moroccan citizen, says Muslim. The French Protectorate created Moroccan citizenship. All Moroccan citizens are Muslim: the “Moroccan” Jew is only but a *dimmi* (Note to the reader: a *dimmi* is a non-Muslim living in Muslim lands that pays a tax to the state, guaranteeing their protection. This practice was done since the beginning of Islamic expansion). Henceforth, no foreigner can have Moroccan citizenship if they do not embrace Islam.” (Author’s translation)¹⁰

As is to be expected, the Jewish community leaders enacted a campaign against this perception of Jew as *dhimmi*. The transition from Protectorate Morocco to independent Morocco did not automatically imply full and equal citizenship for its Jews. However, Morocco’s King Hassan II, reiterated that all Moroccans were equal citizens, as his father King Mohammed V had declared upon independence. Further confirmation from the monarchy of support for the Jewish community was the naming of Leon Benzaquen, a prominent doctor, as one of the Ministers inaugurating the first cabinet after independence. However, the Jews’ powerlessness when faced with hundreds of kidnapped girls, the conversion campaign that seemed to be supported by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, and its leader’s statements about Jews as *dhimmi* were in effect saying just the opposite. This was one reason among others that pushed many Moroccan Jewish families to leave newly independent Morocco.

Carlos de Nesry’s acuity crystallized the connection between forced conversions, mass emigration to Israel, the symbol of Solika, and the revival of her actions as a saving

¹⁰ “Qui dit marocain, dit musulman. La nationalité marocaine a été créée par le protectorat français. Tout marocain est musulman: le juif “marocain” n’est qu’un *dimmi* (N.L.L.R: un *dimmi* est un non musulman vivant en Terre d’Islam et payant à l’Etat un impôt, moyennant quoi il est protégé. Cette pratique se faisait au début des conquêtes de l’Islam). Dorénavant, nul étranger ne peut acquérir la nationalité marocaine s’il n’embrasse l’Islam.”

force for Moroccan Judaism. In the July-August 1962 issue of *La Voix des Communautés* he says:

...Must Morocco reawaken the ancient quarrels [referring to battles of religious ideology], consequences of backwardness and so incompatible with its current desire for renewal? The International community will soon disapprove of this, and in the meantime its main consequence is the accentuation of the emigration of Moroccan Israelites.

One day, at the beginning of last century, a young Israelite from Tangier, called Sol Hachuel, was kidnapped and converted against her will. She was soon after decapitated in Fez because she was obstinate in her desire to remain faithful to her ancestor's religion. She was "canonized" by popular piety, and she is still venerated as a symbol and an example. Is it excessive to wonder if today, and in the present situation a *mutatis mutandis* replay of this martyrdom is totally impossible? And then what will become of what is left of Moroccan Judaism? (Author's translation)¹¹

The massive exodus of Moroccan Jews continued throughout the 1960s and 1970s, leaving the current population under 2,000 in 2015. Even though this chapter was closed years ago, some adult women still have the mentality of not going out too much. Many of them have stories of being verbally harassed and groped on their way home from school. As adults, they carry within themselves a fear of the dangers of the street.¹² School age girls, (as opposed to boys) are still closely watched and chaperoned, and the community is extremely reticent in allowing adolescent girls to socialize with their Moroccan Muslim peers.

Civil Society and Postcolonial Narratives on Jews & Morocco

Moroccans' ancestry is largely derived from the original inhabitants of Morocco: the Berbers or Amazighen. Some Muslim Moroccans, especially those from Fez, are the

¹¹ ...Faut-il que le Maroc fasse reviver ce querelles surannés, ces sequelles de l'obscurantisme, si peu compatibles avec son désir actuel de renovation, que l'opinion internationaux ne tardera pas, demain, de désapprouver, et que, en attendant, ne font qu'accentuer l'exode des Israélites marocains?

Un jour, au début du siècle dernier, une jeune Israélite de Tanger, du nom de Sol Hachuel, a été enlevée et convertie malgré elle. Elle fut, peu de temps après, décapitée à Fès, car elle s'obstinait à rester fidèle à la religion de ses pères. "Canonisée" par la piété populaire, elle est encore vénérée comme un symbole, comme un exemple. Est-il excessif de se demander si, de nos jours et dans la conjoncture actuelle une réédition "mutatis mutandis" de cette martyre est-elle complètement impossible, et que devienarait alors ce qui reste du Judaïsme marocain?

¹² B.L. Private conversation, February 5, 2013, Casablanca.

descendants of former Jews who chose to or were forced to convert in the last 1000 years. One of the most forgotten historical components of Moroccan history is the ante-Islamic Christian component. Christianity is virtually non-existent in discussions of Moroccan history and identity. The recent exhibit on *Le Maroc medieval* (Fr. Medieval Morocco) at the Louvre and currently in Rabat at the Mohammed VI Contemporary Art Museum includes references to both Jewish and Christian history in Morocco before Islam's arrival.

This invisibility of minorities from the postcolonial national narrative created an enormous vacuum in Moroccan's identity perception that young Moroccans started to question. High school, college age and young professional Moroccans have for the most part never met a Jew, but repeatedly report having heard many stories from their parents and grandparents about the Jews that were their neighbors and friends. The dichotomy that they experience from the stories their older family members tell them, and the negative media about Israel, which is generally conflated with Jew, push many of them to search for answers about Moroccan Jews who were like family but who today, as Jews are perceived by many of them as enemies because of the information they receive in the media. Often these young Moroccans would like to know more about Jewish beliefs, cuisine and rituals. The question that always arises is why they would have left Morocco if they were happy and the shared life was so idyllic.

The massive emigration of the Jewish community coupled with the lack of information on the role and history of this community in the formation of the multi-cultural Morocco became a tangible vacuum in the national psyche. The need for more complex descriptions of what being Moroccan entails have intensified in the last ten years by civil society. This opening of the conversation about Jews and Morocco came at a specific historical juncture, some years after the reign of the current King, Mohammed VI, whose openness and progressiveness has impacted the country on many levels. Public discourse on Jews was tightly controlled by the state until quite recently.

Anthropologists Kosansky and Boum suggest that "recent treatments of Jewish themes and histories in Moroccan cinema reflect the shifting relationship between state and civil

society in the postcolonial period.” (Kosansky & Boum, 2012: 423) In other words, there has been a recent loosening of the control around discourse in the public sphere about Moroccan Jews. Filmmakers, journalists and the non-profit sector are leading in the public discourse about Jews, plurality and the place of religious minorities in Morocco. In 2005 Filmmaker Leila Marrakshi released *MAROCK*, a film on young Muslims and Jews in upper class Casablanca who fell in love across religious boundaries. It was a box office hit and the first example of this taboo subject in public media. In 2007 two other films were released almost simultaneously, *Où va tu Moche?* (Fr. Where are you going Moshe?) and *Adieu Mères* (Fr. Goodbye Mothers), both about the emigration of the Jews from Morocco to Israel and the pain that these separations elicited in both Jews and Muslims. *Adieu Mères* conveys through the title the losing of their “milk brothers”. “Milk-brothers” refers to the common practice of Jewish and Muslim neighbors who would leave their babies with the “Other” when they went shopping, expecting the mother they left their child with to nurse their baby in her absence. The children of both mothers considered themselves to be brothers because they drank from the same milk.

News magazines such as *TelQuel*, *l’Observateur du Maroc*, *Zamane* and others have run cover articles since 2007 on the Jews of Morocco “*Les Juifs en Nous, au Coeur de l’identité Marocaine*” (Fr. The Jew in us, at the heart of Moroccan identity) *TelQuel* 2008; “*Maroc: terre Juive*” (Fr. Morocco: Jewish land) *Zamane* 2013 etc... These articles have helped to promote the reintegration of Jews into the public national narrative of what it is to be a Moroccan.

Social media is very important in Morocco as a source for information and news. Facebook plays an important role in establishing forums and virtual meeting places in what has until recently been a society with many social strictures. Facebook has a series of Muslim and Jewish Moroccan groups where encounters and discussions that are not possible in the real world take place. These groups (*Juif du Maroc*, *Moroccan Jews*, *Jewish-Muslim Moroccan friendship*, etc...) become forums for reiteration of the similar affinities and allegiances that are shared by Jews and Muslims in Morocco, as well as

anti-Jewish sentiments. There is a Muslim man from Oujda, in Eastern Morocco bordering Algeria, which is considered by Jews as a city where anti-Semitism run deep who has become the most active member of Juifs du Maroc. Through a collection of photographs he has amassed, he posts weekly and sometimes daily in an attempt to reconstruct portions of Moroccan Jewish memory online. His online activity has also had tangible impact in the real world. In one occasion, he put two Jewish family members back in touch thirty years after their emigration with their cousins who stayed in Morocco.

The confluence of the unveiling into the public eye of the depth and importance of Moroccan Judaism to “la Marocanité” has probably been a catalyst for those who have their own private family histories which have been buried for various generations. The Jewish component of Moroccan history has been officially acknowledged through the constitution of 2011¹³ as an important tributary to the secular identity of the country. Now that being Jewish in Morocco is accepted as being fully Moroccan, a Moroccan Muslim with Jewish roots suddenly feels permission to explore these family histories, and in a few cases to integrate Jewish practice into their lives.

Practice

Reintegrating Jewish practice into the life of a Muslim is a controversial and dangerous step to make publicly. It is illegal in Morocco for a Muslim to abandon Islam in preference for another religion. The most dramatic example of this is the case of Sol Hachuel (d. 1834), the young Jewish girl from Tangier who was beheaded in Fez by the royal court because she was tried as *ridda* (Ar. apostate), an apostate from Islam (Hassine, 2011, 117). She was convicted as reneging from a conversion to Islam from Judaism. Moroccan Jews hail her as a saint because of her commitment to Judaism, and she has been renamed *Lalla Soulika* (Ar. Lady Soulika) or *Sol HaSadiká* (Heb. Sol The Saint).

¹³ "l'unité du pays (...) s'est nourrie et enrichie de ses affluents africain, andalou, hébraïque et méditerranéen". "The unity of the country (...) is nourished and enriched by its African, Andalusian, Hebraic and Mediterranean affluents."

Today, Moroccan Muslims who want to integrate Jewish practices into their lives as part of capturing their connection to their Jewish ancestry are an uncomfortable development for the Jewish community and the Jewish courts, whose *dayanim* (Heb. judges), are Jewish religious Moroccan government officials, religious Jewish judges on government payroll.

The few Moroccans who discovered their Jewish ancestry and have decided to incorporate Jewish practice into their lives are transgressing the historical boundaries that have existed between the two communities on the legal level. Historically, once a Jew converted to Islam and joined the Muslim community, he and his children were lost forever to the Jewish community. This article will present two case studies about young men, who have incorporated Jewish practice into their lives as a way of reclaiming their ancestral connection. One of them continues being a practicing Muslim, while the other presents himself as Muslim to the outside world, but does not engage in Muslim practice anymore.

These two cases present striking similarities to cases of crypto-Jewish culture in the southwest of the United States. The fact that the public and private narratives of self are changing and encompass memory, form oral histories and present self-definitions through which the process of *jonglerie* (Fr. juggling) occurs... (Kunin, 2009: 197). These young men are negotiating their shift in identity and practice similarly to other crypto-Jews.

CASE STUDIES

The first case study is a young man (R.) whose maternal grandmother was a Jewish woman who married a Muslim man for love. When told that according to Jewish law he would be considered Jewish, he responded that it was not the first time someone told him that. He said that he was raised as a Muslim but his grandmother never converted to Islam. His mother grew up performing certain Jewish rituals at home with *her* mother. When asked if his mother identified as Muslim or as Jewish and he answered that she was raised Muslim, but was not embarrassed to acknowledge her mother's Jewishness. In 2015, he could be considered like a third generation Converso who is returning to open

practice (they light the hannukia, and practice shabbat), much like Anousim in Iberia in the 16th century were sometimes returning to Jewish practice and sometimes not.

Since that original conversation in 2010, R. traveled to Israel and learned Hebrew on the Internet. He attends synagogue on occasion. He observes Yom Kippur, Passover and Hannuka – and had a *kippa* (Heb. head-covering) made in Hebrew, with his Arabic name spelled out in Hebrew characters. When I asked R. in May 2014 about his Jewish practice, he said,

“I am both. My Mother is happy I’m doing this, but she wants to be sure I’ll be safe. And I’m the only one in my family who is interested in this. My sister isn’t at all. My younger brother is a little bit. But I am the one who is the most interested and committed.”¹⁴

M., the second case study is more complex. He is the fifth generation descendant of a male ancestor who left the *mellah* (Ar. Jewish quarter) of Fes at the end of the 18th century and moved to the surrounding countryside to escape forced conversions. His father was the one who started the family’s return to Judaism. They have the original deed to the property in the *mellah*, written in Hebrew characters. And that is one of the most important links to confirm their Jewishness.

“The family name was Benhayoun (changed from the original). Jews came to visit my grandfather in the countryside, we have the papers to trace it back, from his farm and the *mellah* and the stories that haven’t been broken.

My mother is my father’s cousin. But we’ve cut the link from the rest of the family. We have Jewish blood. We are proud of being Jewish. But the unhappy thing is the story of my great great grandfather, unhappily, because they were sent out of the *mellah* in a savage, non-human manner. Because they had to either convert to Islam or be beaten to death. So, he decided to leave the city and forget everything and establish himself in the area around the city. He never converted, it was only his sons, but only in name.

I have to find a Jewish woman, who will accept my situation. I want a Jewish life, I’m proud, proud of my father who renewed the link. And frankly it’s not easy, if the Muslims know that you are Jewish, you risk your life. In the law there are... it’s forbidden that a Muslim converts... even if his origin is Jewish. But, we believe in this philosophy and we’ll do the impossible to continue on this road, *Baruch Hashem*.

¹⁴ Private phone conversation, May 26, 2014.

...When I go into the synagogue on Friday and I feel the preparation of Shabbat. I find that, it's incredible. The songs, the people, the prayer, the Torah reading. It's really interesting. I find the link that connects me to *Baruch Hu*, to Gd. And that's what holds me up.¹⁵

M. whispered the whole conversation and was concerned that I not reveal anything to link him to his true feelings. He continues to share Jewish posts on a facebook profile which has a Jewish alias, a curtain to cover his truer complex identity which is Crypto-Jewish Moroccan. However M. could not be considered to be Jewish by *halacha* by the local community because his Jewish ancestor is a male. He realizes that his status is precarious and is not quite sure how he will proceed.

Identities are built through defining oneself vis à vis the other. Identities define who you are, not only by who you are, but also by who you are not, as in Maalouf's statement (cf. supra 3) The significance of the case studies presented in this article is that M. and R. are disregarding the dualistic nature of how Jewish and Muslim identities are perceived, as oppositional. For these two cases, their Jewish and Muslim Moroccan identities are integrated in what has previously been assumed to be mutually exclusive. One's identity as a Moroccan was historically, either to be Muslim or Jewish, but it could never be both. By embracing Judaism and Islam R. establishes that Judaism is a spiritual discipline that can coexist in practice together with Islam in his life. M. is more categorical, his family travels away during the major Muslim holidays so that the neighbors don't realize that they aren't celebrating those holidays. He wants to marry a Jewish woman and have a Jewish household and lifestyle. He believes that to do this, he will have to leave Morocco, but he still presents himself publicly as a Muslim.

These two case studies are rare within the wider phenomenon of Jewish identity reintegration which exists in Morocco. They create a legal conundrum for the Jewish community because no rabbi in Morocco would state that a person with a Muslim father

¹⁵ Interview, June 22, 2014.

and a Jewish mother could reintegrate into the Jewish community. Not only regarding the legal issue, but socially, Moroccan Jews are reluctant to accept a Muslim into closed Jewish ritual circles. An older Jewish man from Casablanca said, “I have never had a goy sit at my shabbat table, we would never do that, it has never been done. It’s forbidden.”¹⁶ Not every Jewish household is as categorical, but there are certain communal boundaries which are considered insurmountable intra-communally, such as romantic liaisons between a Muslim man and a Jewish woman. In the words of an older Jewish lady who lives in Casablanca:

If a Jewish woman is with a Christian it is better seen because at least Jesus was Jewish, and they have the Old Testament. But the Arabs come from Ishmael and there was a real break between Hagar and Sarah. The difference between Isaac and Ishmael was a real break. It is not the same as if it were with a Christian, at least that is more acceptable. But here in Morocco it is absolutely unacceptable for a Jewish woman to be with a Muslim man.¹⁷

There have been many cases historically where these romantic liaisons have existed, even leading towards marriage, but it is not seen in a positive light by either the Jewish or the Muslim families. Jewish Moroccan mothers declared intermarriage as a “divine curse and the complete negation of their very existence” (Toledano, 2002: 161).

Notwithstanding these fraught emotions regarding Islam penetrating into the sanctuary of Jewish families, the Jewish community and Jewish Moroccan individuals feel indebted to the Moroccan governmental establishment for the consideration, protection and friendliness towards the Jews and the Jewish component of Moroccan identity. No Jew in Morocco wants to jeopardize the friendliness of that relationship. In fact, the declaration in the constitution of 2011, that includes the “Hebraic” element of Moroccan identity as one of the forming elements of national identity is a source of pride for most Moroccans, Jews and Muslims alike. The new constitution is hailed as proof of the progressiveness of the King and the Moroccan population. It is quoted often in Morocco and in international platforms that celebrate Morocco’s culture. One recent example was at the *Institut du*

¹⁶ B.A. private conversation, May 16, 2014, Casablanca.

¹⁷ B.R. private conversation, field notes, April 18, 2008, Casablanca.

Monde Arabe (IMA)¹⁸ in Paris during the celebration of Morocco's Jewish heritage last November where the President of the IMA, Jack Lang opened the session stating

“the 2011 Constitution is unique in the world, because it recognizes Morocco's diversity and the richness of its tributaries, especially the Hebraic element, underlining the fact that the Kingdom of Morocco is today an example of tolerance.”(Author's translation)¹⁹

Similarly to the Crypto-Jews in Spain, Portugal and the Americas who came to terms with their layered religious identities in different manners, the current examples from the descendants of converted Jews in Morocco show a similar continuum of identification with, and in a minority of cases, reintegration of Jewish identity. This fluidity of relationship to their perception of postcolonial self-identity is a recent development. It shows how the confluence of recent Moroccan policies celebrating the country's diversity in addition to a generational shift thanks to the ability to communicate in uncensored manner through the internet and social media, have bolstered this process of identity fluidity at multiple levels of Moroccan society.

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¹⁸ The Arab World Institute is a cultural institution in the heart of Paris which had an exhibit in the fall and spring of 2014-2015 on Contemporary Morocco. There were various months of programming highlighting the various elements of Moroccan culture.

¹⁹ Quoted in [darnna.com](http://www.darnna.com) in the post: L'évolution du judaïsme marocain à travers l'histoire
Posted by aaron , November, 24 2014 at 15:58
<http://www.darnna.com/phorum/read.php?13,199876,200975> consulted May 15, 2015 at 2:54 pm.
“Ouvrant cette rencontre, le président de l'IMA, Jack Lang avait rappelé que la Constitution de 2011 est unique au monde puisqu'elle revendique la diversité du Maroc et la richesse de ses affluents, notamment hébraïque, soulignant que le Royaume est aujourd'hui un modèle de tolérance.”

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